

## Religion and the “Religious”: Cormac McCarthy and John Dewey

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**ABSTRACT:** This article brings Cormac McCarthy’s novels into discussion with Dewey’s thinking, particularly with an eye to the distinction, made famous from *A Common Faith*, between religion and “the religious.” In this work Dewey argues for emancipating what is genuinely religious from all that is adventitious to it—above all, anything wedded to ideas of the supernatural—so that “the religious aspect of experience will be free to develop freely on its own account.” He concludes by highlighting the need to make explicit and militant “the common faith of mankind”—which lies in the recognition that “the things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves” but “exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link.” While McCarthy’s novels share Dewey’s broadly anti-supernatural and anti-ecclesiastical commitments, there are some areas of divergence between the two that allow us to reflect critically on the distinction between religion and “the religious.” Most significantly, whereas Dewey aims to discern the intrinsic quality of the religious apart from what is adventitious to it, McCarthy focuses on the historical givenness of religious practices so as then to imagine their repurposing and radical transformation.

**KEYWORDS:** John Dewey, Cormac McCarthy, religion, supernatural, philosophy

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery.

—CORMAC MCCARTHY, *The Road*

“There are no absolutes in human misery and things can always get worse” (McCarthy 1992, 372). So says the narrator in Cormac McCarthy’s *Suttree*, and one could cite almost any of McCarthy’s writings as an illustration of this idea.<sup>1</sup> Yet, if there is any one novel that demonstrates it most compellingly, it would have to be *The Road*, a meditation that is both philosophical in character and unrelentingly brutal in its portrait of human suffering.<sup>2</sup> The unnamed father and son who are the main characters of McCarthy’s novel struggle to keep themselves alive in a world where all plants and animals and nearly all human beings have been wiped out by some apocalyptic catastrophe. That the world so depicted gives the lie to providential theism, and so to virtually the entirety of religious tradition, is made explicit when their situation is described as “barren, silent, godless” (4) and when the wandering old man, Ely, tells them: “There is no God and we are his prophets” (143).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the novel reimagines religious practice at this null point of human history, and in so doing it illuminates our own situatedness with respect to religious tradition on this side of the catastrophe. In what follows I bring McCarthy’s *The Road* into discussion with John Dewey’s account of the “religious” in order to explore the philosophical project of appropriating and reinterpreting religious tradition.

Let us begin by recalling the general features of Dewey’s account of the “religious,” as distinct from religion—a distinction made famous in Dewey’s *A Common Faith* (1934), though the basic structure of the argument is already implicit in his earlier Gifford Lectures, published as *The Quest for Certainty* (1929). The latter text begins, memorably, with the observation that human beings seek security according to one or two basic strategies: either propitiating powers from without through religious observance or changing the world through action, the invention of arts, and so on.<sup>4</sup> Of course, the first strategy has invited philosophical criticism from

the very beginning, and Dewey focuses our attention on the ways in which Greek philosophers set themselves the task of purifying religious thinking and practice. On this point he cites a remarkable passage from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* XII.8, which argues that the only thing "evident" (*phaneron*) within inherited religious belief is just the claim that the first beings are divine: "It has been handed down from the ancients and earliest ones, and bequeathed to later generations in the form of myth, that these [i.e., heavenly bodies—he was just talking about *ouranos*] are gods and that the divine encompasses the whole of nature [ὅτι θεοί τέ εἰσιν οὗτοι καὶ περιέχει τὸ θεῖον τὴν ὅλην φύσιν]" (1074b1–3). "The rest," Aristotle writes, "has been added later in the form of myth for the sake of persuading the many [τὰ δὲ λοιπὰ μυθικῶς ἤδη προσήκται πρὸς τὴν πειθῶ τῶν πολλῶν] and as an instrument useful for the *nomoi* and for expediency [καὶ πρὸς τὴν εἰς τοὺς νόμους καὶ τὸ συμφέρον χρῆσιν]" (*Met.* 1074b3–8).<sup>5</sup>

Dewey comments on this passage as follows:

The negative work of philosophy was then to strip away these imaginative accretions. From the standpoint of popular belief this was its chief work, and it was a destructive one. The masses only felt that their religion was attacked. But the enduring contribution was positive. The belief that the divine encompasses the world was detached from its mythical context and made the basis of philosophy, and it became also the foundation of physical science. . . . [I]t is clear that these philosophies were systematizations in rational form of the content of Greek religious and artistic beliefs. The systematization involved a purification. . . . Thus, along with the elimination of myths and grosser superstitions, there were set up the ideals of science and of a life of reason. (1988, 13–14)

However, in purifying religious tradition, Greek philosophy bestowed upon later tradition a dubious gift: namely, for Dewey, an "insistence that security is measured by certainty of knowledge, while the latter is measured by adhesion to fixed and immutable objects, which therefore are independent of what men do in practical activity" (1988, 24), an attempt "to prove that the ideal is already and eternally a property of the real" (1988, 240).<sup>6</sup> This traditional and distinctive way of critiquing religion has saddled philosophy with a number of irresolvable conundrums, including those specific to philosophy of religion, for example, the "problem of evil."<sup>7</sup>

But even though the classical philosophical critique of religious tradition had the shortcomings noted above, Dewey diagnoses religion in the twentieth century as having problems not unlike those identified by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* and indeed by philosophers stretching back to Xenophanes in the sixth century B.C.<sup>8</sup> In *Human Nature and Conduct* Dewey writes:

Religion has lost itself in cults, dogmas and myths. . . . In effect religion has been distorted into a possession—or burden—of a limited part of human nature, of a limited portion of humanity which finds no way to universalize religion except by imposing its own dogmas and ceremonies upon others; of a limited class within a partial group; priests, saints, a church. Thus other gods have been set up before the one God. Religion as a sense of the whole is the most individualized of all things, the most spontaneous, undefinable and varied. For individuality signifies unique connections in the whole. Yet it has been perverted into something uniform and immutable. It has been formulated into fixed and defined beliefs expressed in required acts and ceremonies. Instead of marking the freedom and peace of the individual as a member of an infinite whole, it has been petrified into a slavery of thought and sentiment. (1983, 226–27)<sup>9</sup>

Religion, in the terms analyzed here, calls for philosophical critique so as to allow it to more properly fulfill its function in service to “the freedom and peace of the individual”—which, in the language of *A Common Faith*, means emancipating the “religious” quality of experience from the “slavery of thought and sentiment” too often characteristic of specific religions. Accordingly, what we find in *A Common Faith* is that the distinction between religion and the “religious” is tied to this project of philosophical purification. For example, Dewey (1991, 2, 27, 50) writes of emancipating what is genuinely religious from ideas of the supernatural; the “disposal of outgrown traits” and wiping the slate clean so that what is religious may “express itself free from all historic encumbrances” (1991, 6); detaching what is properly “religious” from pointless entanglements with science;<sup>10</sup> dislocating the religious from specific religions—that is, from “the doctrinal or intellectual apparatus and the institutional accretions that . . . are, in a strict sense, adventitious to the intrinsic quality of such experiences” (1991, 15, 17); and above all, the “assumption of the antecedent inherent

identity of actual and ideal” (1988, 240). In this way Dewey aims to isolate the one value that the religious attitude cannot do without, namely, “the worth of discovering the possibilities of the actual and striving to realize them” (1988, 242).

Dewey’s own philosophical critique and purification of religious tradition involves at least three key aspects. First, he argues that what is properly “religious” is not limited to what we ordinarily associate with religious belief/practice but, rather, is something to be found across the full range of human practices. Thus, he writes, “the adjective ‘religious’ denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs. . . . It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal” (1988, 9–10).<sup>11</sup> Second, Dewey (1991, 2) argues that what is properly “religious” need not rely on either postulating the supernatural,<sup>12</sup> or adhering to ecclesiastical authority, or believing in the God of theism.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, it need not rely on any sense of “God” whatsoever, as is clear when he writes in *A Common Faith* that religious qualities and values “are not bound up with any single item of intellectual assent, not even that of the existence of the God of theism” (1991, 32–33).<sup>14</sup> Third, Dewey’s project involves an appropriation of traditional religious language and the ongoing reinterpretation of it—a mainstay of his thinking from the 1890s on.<sup>15</sup> In these various ways the purification at work here reverses the traditional project of purifying religious tradition: whereas classical philosophies oriented themselves toward an immutable antecedent reality in order to purify the mythico-religious inheritance, Dewey’s idea of the “religious” signifies the future-oriented uniting of actual and ideal. Dewey’s reinterpretation of the meaning of “God” in *A Common Faith* in terms of an “active relation between ideal and actual” (1991, 51) is one illustration of this aspect of his project. Another is his unpacking of “faith” in the same work as a trust “that the natural interactions between man and his environment will breed more intelligence and generate more knowledge provided the scientific methods that define intelligence are pushed further into the mysteries of the world” (1991, 26)—though, to be sure, Dewey’s outlook here has led some critics to take issue with its “naive optimism.”<sup>16</sup>

In vivid contrast with Dewey’s faith in human progress, McCarthy’s novel *The Road* offers us the bleakest portrait imaginable. The novel opens years after the world has undergone some catastrophic event that is recalled only in hazy images (“The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear

of light and then a series of low concussions. . . . A dull rose glow in the windowglass" [45])—and because of the enormity of the catastrophic event, there seems to be no way for the human survivors to comprehend what happened.<sup>17</sup> But human civilization has come to an end: everything lies in ruins, the ruins have been ransacked for whatever food or water was stored, and the mummified dead are strewn everywhere, "discalced to a man like pilgrims of some common order for all their shoes were long since stolen" (21). The earth, still smoldering and catching fire anew, is covered in ash, befouling all water sources, and the sun is permanently veiled by ash in the atmosphere.<sup>18</sup> Even the coast has been turned into a "vast salt sepulcher" of dead birds, fish skeletons by the millions, and human wreckage.<sup>19</sup> Other human survivors encountered by the man and his son either are starving or have resorted to cannibalism, among other degradations. In such a setting, there is scarcely anything like an extant religious tradition to be appropriated or reinterpreted in the way that Dewey models for us.

Of course, it is impossible not to see the situation depicted in *The Road* as itself a reflection of religious tradition, as it makes full use of inherited fantasies of the apocalypse. Time and again the narration presents something on the order of an ultimate revelation: "The frailty of everything revealed at last," the narrator proclaims at one point (24). In another passage, when the father is standing in the charred ruins of a library, staring at blackened books in the water, it occurs to him all of a sudden that "the value of the smallest thing [is] predicated on a world to come. . . . That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation" (158). Elsewhere in the novel, the moment of revelation is sketched out in greater detail:

They scabbled through the charred ruins of houses they would not have entered before. A corpse floating in the black water of a basement among the trash and rusting ductwork. He stood in a livingroom partly burned and open to the sky. The waterbuckled boards sloping away into the yard. Soggy volumes in a bookcase. He took one down and opened it and then put it back. Everything damp. Rotting. . . . He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. (110)

As we have seen, at certain points in the narrative, the revelation is understood in terms of the death of God—at least, the providential God of traditional theism. For example, near the end of the novel we read: “Perhaps in the world’s destruction it would be possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence” (230–31).<sup>20</sup> Still, more striking than these pronouncements is the father’s claim, “If he [the boy] is not the word of God God never spoke” (4), his belief that the boy is a god (145) and is his “warrant”—so much so that if the boy died, he would want to go with him (9).<sup>21</sup>

Yet we cannot help but wonder what it means for the father to call the boy a “god” or for him to speak of being appointed by God to protect the boy. Is he merely trying to hold onto a world that has gone away? Among the things that he holds in memory from the time before the catastrophe are experiences he had with his own father, fishing for trout in mountain streams,<sup>22</sup> as well as a memory of the contentment he felt one time waking in the night under a myriad of stars and gazing upon the crashing surf along the sea’s black horizon, smoothing his wife’s hair as she slept: “And he said if he were God he would have made the world just so and no different” (185). Further, the father carries in his thoughts a dialogue in relation to human beings now gone. He asks himself at one point: “Do you think that your fathers are watching? That they weigh you in their ledgerbook? Against what? There is no book and your fathers are dead in the ground” (165). And then, a bit later, seemingly in response to this question: “I think maybe they are watching, he said. They are watching for a thing that even death cannot undo and if they do not see it they will turn away from us and they will not come back” (177). Most significant is his memory of the last conversation that he had with his wife before she went off into the woods to slit her wrists. They had spent a hundred nights debating the pros and cons of self-destruction, but in their last conversation she tells him that there is nothing left to talk about (48). She says to him: “My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now. . . . As for me my only hope is for eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart” (48–49).

Whereas his wife chose to take her own life rather than to let happen what she believed to be inevitable, the father chose to struggle on and keep the boy alive. Both choices are responses to the ruination of meaning that

comes in tow with the world's ruin. This aspect of the father's struggle is brought out in the following passage:

He tried to think of something to say but could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (75)<sup>23</sup>

It is in the context of this ruination of meaning that the father takes upon himself the calling to orient the boy toward some meaningful appropriation of the past: he tells his son old stories of courage and justice, and he teaches him a new sacred idiom—"carrying the fire" (70, 234, 238). In so doing, the father, perhaps unwittingly, gives to his son the possibility of challenging the father's moral judgment—we see this happen in the scene after the father has punished a thief by taking all his belongings, even his clothes, and left him shivering in the cold. The boy protests what is, in effect, a death sentence for the thief and believes that it is they who have killed him (218–19). Some time later, when the father wants to talk to the boy about it and offers to tell him a story, the boy declines to listen to it, saying, "Those stories are not true. . . . [I]n the stories we're always helping people and we dont help people" (225). In other words, the stories that the father has related to his son constitute a tradition of reflection that is interpretable in ways that go beyond the father's capacity to live in accord with these stories.

Twice in the novel we find them engaging in a form of traditional religious practice—namely, prayer—though, in each case, it has been altered or repurposed to their situation. The first scene occurs when, after starving for some days, they discover a bomb shelter with its provisions of clothing, canned food, and other resources intact. As they are about to eat their first cooked meal within the shelter, the boy asks whether he can thank the people who provisioned it: "Dear people, thank you for all this food and stuff. We know that you saved it for yourself and if you were here we wouldnt eat it no matter how hungry we were and we're sorry that you didn't get to



eat it and we hope that you're safe in heaven with God" (123). God is not the addressee of this prayer; rather, it is addressed to the human beings who brought it about. We might think of it as an acknowledgment of the characters' tie to those who went before, not unlike Dewey's thought at the end of *A Common Faith*: "We who now live are parts of a humanity that extends into the remote past, a humanity that has interacted with nature. The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link. . . . Here are all the elements for a religious faith that shall not be confined to sect, class or race" (1991, 87).<sup>24</sup> Except what the boy offers in his prayer is not an acknowledgment of their indebtedness to humanity in general or to human civilization (for all that is now gone) but an attempt to communicate personally with the people whose food stores now keep them alive. In place of the traditional words addressed to God, we hear words addressed to the dead whose provisions must do in the absence of divine providence.<sup>25</sup>

The second scene in which prayer is transformed appears near the end, in what is surely the most excruciating moment of the novel. The father is dying and has a last dialogue with his son, giving him in effect a blessing that he be "lucky" as he now must go on alone: "You need to go on, he said. I cant go with you. You need to keep going. You don't know what might be down the road. We were always lucky. You'll be lucky again. You'll see. Just go. It's all right" (234). They had saved a last bullet in the gun to end the boy's life if the father could no longer keep him safe in the world (cf. 96, also 210), but the father cannot go through with the plan. The son pleads with his father to take him with him:

Please, Papa.

I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant.

You said you wouldnt ever leave me.

I know. I'm sorry. You have my whole heart. You always did. You're the best guy. You always were. If I'm not here you can still talk to me. You can talk to me and I'll talk to you. You'll see.

Will I hear you?

Yes. You will. You have to make it like talk that you imagine. And you'll hear me. You have to practice. Just don't give up. Okay?

Okay.

Okay.

I'm really scared Papa.

I know. But you'll be okay. You're going to be lucky. I know you are.

I've got to stop talking. I'm going to start coughing again.

It's okay, Papa. You don't have to talk. It's okay. (235)<sup>26</sup>

The boy then goes down the road as far as he dares to but comes back to find his father asleep. He closes his eyes and begins to practice talking to his father and listening; in the night his father passes away (236). The father could not provide the boy with a place to shelter and sustain him in the ruined world, but he fashions for him a practice of remembrance through words—an *anamnetic* practice in place of providence from without.

The religious character of this anamnetic practice is underscored in the final scene of the novel. The boy is found by someone who had been watching them—a man who has a wife and two kids and tells the boy that he can come with them. The first meeting between the boy and his new mother/guardian is described as follows: “The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn't forget. The woman said that was all right. She said that the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all of time” (241). Granted, it is a disturbing end to the novel, and we have to wonder whether the scene is not merely a projection of our wish (and the father's wish) that the boy be safe in “some unimaginable future, glowing in that waste like a tabernacle” (230).<sup>27</sup> And yet the mother/guardian's teaching about the breath of God, here at the novel's end, gathers the thread running throughout, for the novel begins with the father waking in the woods in the dark and cold and reaching out to feel the boy breathing: “His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath” (3). The narrative brings into closest proximity the ruin of the world and their breathing: “Everything uncoupled from its shoring. Unsupported in the ashen air. Sustained by a breath, trembling and brief” (10); “He held the boy shivering against him and counted each frail breath in the blackness” (12; also 208). Even Ely's black-humored remark, “Things

will be better when everybody's gone. . . . We'll all be better off. We'll all breathe easier" (145), continues this thread in the novel. At the end, it is the boy listening in the night for his father's breathing (230), the boy who stays with the father until his body has grown cold and stiff (236). This last passage recalls another in which the man wakes in the dark of the woods and reaches out for the boy: "Warmth and movement. Heartbeat" (98). Breathing, heartbeat, warmth, movement—these are the original, archaic associations of the word *psychē*, the ground and soil from which the concept of soul emerged and then came down to us through the religious and philosophical tradition. What are we reading in this novel but a meditation in search of some elemental source of meaning in the face of the world's ruin?

If the novel can be read along the lines sketched out here, namely, in terms of the collapse of meaning and the struggle to appropriate and reinterpret the inherited religious language so as to inhabit it meaningfully, then it offers us a lens through which to examine ourselves.<sup>28</sup> *The Road* takes place at the extremity of human experience, since it captures the collapse of meaning following a catastrophe, and in this way everything is seen from the perspective of near-absolute ruin and the uncertainty, even improbability, of human life, going forward. So, for example, at one point the man carves a flute for the boy, and as he listens to the boy playing it, he thinks: "A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from the ashes of its ruin" (66). But the father's despair over "the names of things . . . believed to be true," "the sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality" (75), though intensified by the catastrophe, is yet continuous with human experience in general. For beauty, goodness, truth—"the elemental words with which Dasein expresses itself"<sup>29</sup>—all of this is inherently unstable, liable to collapse, "the things in which we wander [πλανᾶσθαι]" (*Phaedrus* 263b). And so the extreme loss of meaning at issue in *The Road* illuminates the more ordinary, and therefore less conspicuous, loss of meaning experienced by us on this side of the catastrophe.

Elsewhere in McCarthy's writings we find religious language and practice transformed into the grotesque—such as Judge Holden's "War is God" theology in *Blood Meridian*—or religious language and practice drained of meaning, turned into the merely adventitious, as we find in *Suttree* when

the main character returns to the Catholic church of his childhood and contemplates the things around him:

Long leatherpadded kneebenches underfoot. Where rows of hemorhoidal dwarves convene by night. . . . Here a sallow plaster Christ. . . . This kingdom of fear and ashes. Like the child that sat in these self-same bones so many black Fridays in terror of his sins. Vice-ridden child, heart rotten with fear. Listening to the slide shoot back in the confessional, waiting his turn. . . . Lives proscribed and doom in store, doom's adumbration in the smoky censer, the faint creak of the tabernacle door, the tasteless bread and draining the last of the wine from the cruet in the corner and counting the money in the box. . . . [T]he deathreek of the dark and half scorched muslin that they wore. Grim and tireless in their orthopedic moralizing. (McCarthy 1992, 253–54)<sup>30</sup>

By contrast with these earlier novels, what *The Road* depicts is the effort to breathe new life into the inheritance of religious tradition, transform it reinterpretedly and so pass it on to the next generation. In any case, it is the way that characters in *The Road* appropriate and reinterpret religious language/practice that is telling for our discussion of McCarthy alongside Dewey. For *The Road's* abandonment of the providential God of tradition and turn toward the child as a god, its repurposing of prayer as a practice of remembrance to sustain the boy in an “unimaginable future,” is akin to Dewey's abandoning the traditional idea of God as an antecedent being who has already united the actual and ideal, in favor of thinking God as a future-oriented uniting of actual and ideal. As a work of fiction rather than philosophy, *The Road* offers no exact parallel to Dewey's concept of the “religious,” and yet, arguably, the novel illustrates this concept very powerfully and does so by stripping away almost everything about the known world to lay bare human suffering in extremis.

At the same time the novel can be seen as improving upon Dewey's achievement by focusing on the historical givenness of religious practices in a manner that is noticeably absent from Dewey's account. Here we might recall a critique of Dewey made some years ago by Steven Rockefeller, when he argues that because Dewey was focused single-mindedly on appropriating religious tradition toward social progress and democratic life, “he had little use for what seemed to him to be religious beliefs and

practices associated with earlier forms of social life and utterly separate from the affairs of contemporary civilization,” but, on the other hand, “in many human beings there is a natural impulse to express their religious feelings in rituals and symbols,” and “furthermore, religious rituals may under the right circumstances intensify a person’s religious consciousness” (1991, 539).<sup>31</sup> Even in the situation sketched out in *The Road*, after the death of God or at least after the death of providential theism, the inherited practices are repurposed in hopes of there being some meaning to transmit to the next generation—as the novel puts it: “All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. When you’ve nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them” (63; see also 49). The insight in McCarthy’s novel, if it is an insight, is a matter of preserving what was taken for granted even if we do not fully understand what about it is worthy of handing over to future generations. What is said in the final paragraph of the novel—quoted in the epigraph of this article—about fish in the mountain streams and things older than man, humming with mystery, speaks also to the inherited religious practices that have implicit in them something too easily taken for granted. In this way, then, in appropriating inherited religious language and practice, but transforming them radically, we see in McCarthy’s novel the religious faith that Dewey describes as a devotion to the ideal while manifesting “piety toward the actual” (1988, 244).<sup>32</sup>

#### NOTES

The epigraph is the last paragraph of the novel *The Road* (McCarthy 2006; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page number). I take its counterimage to be the man’s recollection of the destruction of “a great bolus of serpents perhaps a hundred in number” that he witnessed as a child: “The men poured gasoline on them and burned them alive, having no remedy for evil but only for the image of it as they conceived it to be. The burning snakes twisted horribly and some crawled burning across the floor of the grotto to illuminate its darker recesses. As they were mute there were no screams of pain and the men watched them burn and writhe and blacken in just such silence themselves and they disbanded in silence in the winter dusk each with his own thoughts to go home to their suppers” (159).

1. Perhaps the most obvious examples are McCarthy 1993a, 1993b, and 2001.
2. Cormac McCarthy is widely recognized as a major American author, but only recently have his writings been examined for their philosophical depth.

For current work on McCarthy, see the forthcoming collection *Philosophical Approaches to Cormac McCarthy: Beyond Reckoning*, edited by Chris Eagle, which includes my essay “‘The Ruined Shack’: Language and Being-at-Home in Cormac McCarthy’s *Outer Dark* and Heidegger” (Metcalf 2017). See also my essay “Cormac McCarthy and the Bioethical” (forthcoming a). Earlier works on McCarthy of great value include Bell 1983, 1988.

3. Accordingly, the few human beings left alive are described as “creedless shells of men” (24).

4. That the first-mentioned route of dealing with insecurity represents, at bottom, a failure to cope is made clear in the last lecture, where Dewey writes: “Being unable to cope with the world in which he lived, he sought some way to come to terms with the universe as a whole. Religion was, in its origin, an expression of this endeavor” (1988, 233). Compare Dewey 1991, 46: “Men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing. Dependence upon an external power is the counterpart of surrender of human endeavor.”

5. Aristotle’s remarks continue as follows: “For they say that these gods are human in form or are like other animals [ἀνθρωποειδεῖς τε γὰρ τούτους καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ζώων ὁμοίους], and they say other things that are similar or that follow from these. Now if we separate these and accept only the first [ὅν εἴ τις χωρίσας αὐτὸ λάβοι μόνον τὸ πρῶτον], that they considered the primary beings to be gods [ὅτι θεοὺς ᾤοντο τὰς πρώτας οὐσίας εἶναι], we must regard it as divinely inspired [θειῶς ἂν εἰρησθαι νομίσειεν]. . . . To this extent alone are the views of our forefathers and of the earliest thinkers evident to us [ἢ μὲν οὖν πάτριος δόξα καὶ ἢ παρὰ τῶν πρώτων ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ἡμῖν φανερά μόνον]” (*Met.* 1074b8–14). All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

6. Compare Dewey 1991, 21–22: “Faith that something should be in existence as far as lies in our power is changed into the intellectual belief that it is already in existence.” Dewey identifies two ideas in Greek thinking that are “due to the quest for certainty”—namely, “that knowledge is concerned with disclosure of the characteristics of antecedent existences and essences, and that the properties of value found therein provide the authoritative standards for the conduct of life” (1988, 58).

7. In Dewey 1988, 240, we read: “It is the source of the problem of evil; of evil not merely in the moral sense, but in that of the existence of defect and aberration, of uncertainty and error, of all deviation from the perfect.” But note that elsewhere Dewey reformulates the problem of evil in a way amenable to his conception of the “religious”—for example, in 1982, 181: “The problem of evil ceases to be a theological and metaphysical one, and is perceived to be the practical problem of reducing, alleviating, as far as may be removing, the evils of life. Philosophy is no longer under obligation to find ingenious methods

for proving that evils are only apparent, not real, or to elaborate schemes for explaining them away or, worse yet, for justifying them. It assumes another obligation: that of contributing in however humble a way to methods that will assist us in discovering the causes of humanity's ills." Similarly, in *A Common Faith*, Dewey writes that if we interpret God as a projection of human ideals, there is no problem of evil, since the significance of ideal ends goes hand in hand with the existence of evils: see 1991, 45. McCarthy's *Suttree* expresses the classic philosophical problem of evil as follows: "What deity in the realms of dementia, what rabid god decocted out of the smoking lobes of hydrophobia, could have devised a keeping place for souls so poor as is this flesh. This mawky wormbent tabernacle" (1992, 130).

8. On the latter, see my essay "*Physis* in Presocratic Thought: Seeking with Xenophanes" (forthcoming b).

9. Menand reads Dewey's thought here as an outgrowth of the "disestablishmentarianism" running throughout the tradition of pragmatism. He writes: "James often spoke of pragmatism, the philosophy he largely created, as the equivalent of the Protestant Reformation. He intended pragmatism as an argument, in philosophy, for discarding obsolete verbal ritual and rejecting the authority of prior use. . . . [T]here are echoes of this religious analogue in Dewey as well. Pragmatism belongs to a disestablishmentarian impulse in American culture—an impulse that drew strength from the writings of Emerson, who attacked institutions and conformity, and from the ascendancy, after the Civil War, of evolutionary theories, which drew attention to the contingency of all social forms" (2001, 88–89).

10. Dewey formulates it as follows: "Religion . . . has found itself fighting a battle and losing one with science, as if religion were a rival theory about the structure of the natural world. . . . [W]hat lies at the basis of recurrent conflicts with scientific findings is not this or that special dogma so much as it is alliance with philosophical schemes which hold that the reality and power of whatever is excellent and worthy of supreme devotion, depends upon proof of its antecedent existence, so that the ideal of perfection loses its claim over us unless it can be demonstrated to exist in the sense in which the sun and stars exist" (1988, 242). Cf. Dewey 1991, 39: "There is no special subject-matter of belief that is sacrosanct. The identification of science with a particular set of beliefs and ideas is itself a hold-over of ancient and still current dogmatic habits of thought which are opposed to science in its actuality and which science is undermining. . . . The scientific-religious conflict ultimately is a conflict between allegiance to this method and allegiance to even an irreducible minimum of belief so fixed in advance that it can never be modified."

11. Later in the same work Dewey writes: "Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality" (1988, 27).

Rockefeller sees the Deweyan concept of the “religious” as targeting Otto’s idea that “religious experience is something *sui generis*, separate from other kinds of experience and involving a distinct religious reality or object—the sacred—which is utterly separate from all natural qualities” (Rockefeller 1991, 472).

12. Elsewhere Dewey writes: “Religions have been saturated with the supernatural—and the supernatural signifies precisely that which lies beyond experience. . . . Contrast with such ideas, deeply embedded in all Western culture, gives the philosophy of faith in experience a definite and profound meaning” (1930, 177). Noddings (2009) criticizes Dewey’s attempt to articulate a nonsupernatural sense of the “religious,” but the criticism is unpersuasive.

13. On the anti-ecclesiastical or “anticlerical” implications of Dewey’s thought here, see Rorty 1994, 2003. In the latter piece, Rorty writes: “Secularists of my sort hope that ecclesiastical organizations will eventually wither away. We share Dewey’s feeling that militant atheism is as unattractive as militant religious proselytizing, but we want to distinguish between atheism and anti-clericalism. We recognize that the disappearance of ecclesiastical institutions would leave a gap in the lives of religious believers, for they will no longer have a sense of being part of a great and powerful worldly institution. But that gap will be filled, we like to think, by a[n] increased sense of participation in the advance of humanity—theists and atheists together, shoulder to shoulder—toward the fulfillment of social ideals” (2003, 142). For an argument that such anticlericalism is “illiberal,” see Wolterstorff 2003.

14. The passage ends as follows: “Under existing conditions, the religious function in experience can be emancipated only through surrender of the whole notion of special truths that are religious by their own nature” (Dewey 1991, 33). This argument recurs in Dewey’s writing from the early 1890s on. Note that he makes this argument even from within the standpoint of Jesus’s teaching in “Christianity and Democracy” (1893): “Jesus had no cult or rite to impose; no specific forms of worship, no specific acts named religion. . . . Jesus had no special doctrine to impose—no special set of truths labeled religious. . . . The only truth Jesus knew of as religious was Truth. There were no special religious truths which He came to teach; on the contrary, his doctrine was that Truth, however named and however divided by man, is one as God is one; that getting hold of truth and living by it is religion” (1971, 4).

15. See, in particular, Dewey’s reinterpretation of the “idea of invisible powers” (1991, 14) but along with this the idea of faith as evidence of things not seen (1991, 20–23) and the meaning of the word *God* (1991, 50–53). Much earlier Dewey had reinterpreted “revelation” as what occurs through ongoing scientific discovery and human action (1971, 4), the “kingdom of God” in terms of the moral meaning of democracy (1971, 7–9), and the kingdom of God and prophecy in terms of the educator’s calling (see 1972, 95). For later thoughts on the “kingdom of God,” see the last paragraph of Dewey 1982, 201.



16. Most recently in Philip Kitcher's *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism* (2014, 141).

17. The passage continues: "She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. . . . What is happening? / I don't know" (45). At one point in the novel, the man is showing the boy where they are on a state map and explains to him that there are no states anymore: "What happened to them? / I don't know exactly. That's a good question" (36).

18. "Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world" (3); "Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory" (16); "The track of the dull sun moving unseen beyond the murk" (12); "Dark of the invisible moon. . . . By day the banished sun circles the earth like a grieving mother with a lamp" (28).

19. "The bones of seabirds. At the tide line a woven mat of weeds and the ribs of fishes in their millions stretching along the shore as far as eye could see like an isocline of death" (187).

20. The boy's insistence, against his father's objections, that they give some of their food to Ely leads Ely to suppose that the boy believes in God. The father replies, "I don't know what he believes in" (146).

21. He says to the boy: "My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (65). When the man tells Ely that the boy is a god, Ely responds: "Where men can't live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible thing so I hope it's not true" (145).

22. The memory of fishing with his father is mentioned multiple times and then is alluded to in the last paragraph of the novel, which is the epigraph of this article (241).

23. The father recalls hearing migratory birds not long after the catastrophe but never again after that (45). There were times when the father would cry uncontrollably, but not about death: "He wasn't sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he'd no longer any way to think about at all" (109).

24. We hear an echo of this in Dewey 1981, 44: "In enjoyment of present food and companionship, nature, tradition and social organization have cooperated, thereby supplementing our own endeavors so petty and so feeble without this extraneous reinforcement. Goods are by grace not of ourselves." The idea of a "religious faith" in this passage is consistent with Dewey's earlier thought of "the office of religion" as a "sense of community and one's place in it" (1983, 226). The above passage from *A Common Faith* ends as follows: "Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind. It remains to make it explicit and militant" (Dewey 1991, 87).

25. But that prayer so understood, as addressed to the dead, may be interpreted as the implicit structure of dialogue between the living is, I take it, what Derrida

- calls the “question-prayer” that is anterior to dialogue. See his discussion of this in his meditation on the philosophical friendship that he had with Levinas, in Derrida 1999, 13. I owe notice of the parallel with Derrida’s text to Megan Craig. 26. This recalls the man’s last dialogue with his wife. She says that her heart was pulled out the day their son was born, and the father says that the boy has his heart and always did; she says that she cannot delay taking her own life and urges him to kill himself and the boy, and he says that he cannot hold his dead child in his arms. 27. The ambiguous, disturbing character of McCarthy’s novel on its final page is effaced in the 2009 film *The Road* by the fact that there is musical accompaniment to the scene in which the boy meets and is welcomed by the family after his father’s death—the music prompting an emotional response on the part of the audience that, I would argue, should be left in question. Wielenberg offers a reading of the final scene that is not complicated in the way that I am suggesting but is philosophically significant: “As the man is dying, he gives the child the following instructions: ‘You need to find the good guys but you cant take any chances. No chances. Do you hear?’ (278). It is impossible to follow these instructions; there is no way to connect with other good guys without taking some sort of chance. . . . The child takes a chance, disobeying his father’s instructions, and as a result is able to connect with another family. . . . The man knows that things are hopeless for the child unless he can connect with other good guys, yet this cannot happen until the man has died. . . . He can truly succeed as a parent only by dying” (2010, 8).
28. On my reading, this is the function of myth, regarded philosophically—see Plato’s *Phaedrus* (230a), where Socrates uses the image of looking through traditional myth so as to examine ourselves.
29. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes: “Still, in the end it is the business of philosophy to *protect the power of the most elemental words* in which Da-sein expresses itself from being flattened by the common understanding to the point of unintelligibility” (1996, 220). See Metcalf 2010 for a treatment of Heidegger’s thinking on religion in line with the discussion here.
30. The quotation ends as follows: “Filled with tales of sin and unrepentant deaths and visions of hell and stories of levitation and possession and dogmas of semitic damnation for the tacking up of the paraclete” (McCarthy 1992, 254).
31. Rockefeller continues: “Dewey did not wish to deny this, but he did not explore fully the ritual aspect of the religious life as a natural mode of expression and sharing and the ways in which it may become part of the democratic life” (1991, 539).
32. See also Dewey 1930, 180: “The future of religion is connected with the possibility of developing a faith in the possibilities of human experience and human relationships that will create a vital sense of the solidarity of human interests and inspire action to make that sense a reality.”

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